

Steve Dixon's online campaign Target for Tonight
Mission 5 Ludwigshafen
8/9th August 1943

Still fuming from giving a dressing down to Flt Sgt Tullo I returned to my quarters to get ready for tonight's Op to raid the IG Farben factory at Ludwigshafen. Of all the stupid things to do after I had already put him on notice, to turn up late for the afternoon briefing! The man is exasperating in the extreme. "You realise that we have to work as a team, to trust each other with our lives. At the moment the team doesn't trust you and we feel that we are having to make up for your deficiencies! Well – what have you got to say for yourself?" "I was unavoidably detained Sir. One of those things that just couldn't be helped Sir." "Do you seriously expect me to believe all that guff? If you devoted half as much to your flying duties as you do to whatever it is that you're involved with off base then you would have the makings of a fine crewman. As it is if we weren't on Ops tonight I would have you replaced in double quick time. So understand this – you are henceforth confined to base and if I find so much as a used pencil missing, then I shall hand you over to the Snowdrops.* (*RAF Police) Now pull your finger out and start pulling your weight around here! Do you hear me?" "Yes sir. Certainly Sir." However, the look in his eyes said something very different.

"Today's fox gentlemen." The now established ritual of passing round my hip flask with what ever passed for Scotch these days was completed and we climbed aboard the Phoenix. Once on board everyone settled in for their own pre-flight checks and the nervousness that I had been feeling all day began to subside.

The weather over base was OK but it was going to be cloud all the way to the target and back and with not much of a moon visibility was going to be a bit dicey. We trundled out of dispersment and took up position just behind R Regent. We watched as they made a good take off and then getting the signal I engaged full throttle on all four engines and we were quickly swallowed up by the night sky and were soon in 5/10ths cloud.

We flew out over the North Sea streaming contrails in the older upper air. "OK chaps test your guns." The old crate started to shake under the recoil of the guns and the cockpit filled with the smell of cordite. We flew on undisturbed and were soon crossing the Belgian coast a bit of light flak showed that someone was awake down there but the cloud was our friend tonight and kept us hidden from the probing fingers of the searchlights.

Further into Belgium and the air must have warmed up as our contrails disappeared. We seemed to be all alone in the night sky but in reality there were hundreds of of kind above, below in front and behind us all heading for Germany. And somewhere out there were the Jerry nightfighters just waiting for their chance to pounce. There were more reports coming in from crew who had been attacked from 6 o'clock low with some kind of upward firing canons that could shred the wings off a bomber and yet remain unseen. As we got nearer the border between Belgium and Germany the cloud started to thicken up and I wondered about reminding Flt Sgt Tullo about checking for the recall signal but thought better of it. I don't want to show the rest of the crew my lack of faith in the damned man. Again a bit of light flak cracks and pops away off to Port. Just then Monica starts to pipe up - "Ju88G7 trying to sneak up on us 6 Low Skipper!" but as he says the WO Walmsley has already opened fire from the tail and the clouds turn a bright yellow as the Ju88 explodes before disappearing into the clouds below. "Good show Peter!"

Passing into Hunland the cloud gets even thicker and there is an unbroken carpet of the damn stuff. Let's hope it clears by the time we reach the target. No recall and with H2S and the pathfinders target marking we have some hope at least. "OK start dropping Window."

Shortly after multiple canon shells start ripping through Phoenix from tail to nose killing the Tail Gunner out right, wounding the MUG, destroying the mechanism which opens the bomb bay doors, Wireless Gunner is hit and the oxygen supply to the nose compartment is knocked out and set on fire. "Call in all positions!" With no replies from the three crewmen who have been hit I order our Flt Engineer, FO Buddle to check the damage and get our Bomb Aimer PO Clive Taylor to check on the wounded men. However while I'm doing this the Do217 N2 comes back for another attack and until I know what damage we have sustained I dare not take any violent evasive action. This time he targets both of our wings knocking out number engine forcing me to feather the damn thing hitting the wing root, piercing our inboard fuel tank which thank God self seals and doesn't catch fire and finally completely smashes up the radio equipment. I decide to risk a steep dive, warning the chaps to grab hold before I do, as this chap seems to favour attacking us from below. Most of the bomber stream will be well above us as they have a higher operational ceiling than the Stirling and if we are going to turn for home I want to avoid a collision. That seems to do the trick as there are no more attacks from our "friend".

Christopher and Clive report in with the bad news two wounded and one dead and no way of dropping our bombs. So, right that's it I take her down onto the deck and decide to head hell for leather for home, hedge hopping all the way. At least that will stop the blighters from attacking us from below. I tell Christopher and Clive to put wedge the two wounded men behind the main spar and then to help me keep an eye out for high tension wires and the like, at least there isn't much in the way of high ground where we are going.

The journey back seems interminable but apart from a bit of medium flak as we cross the Belgian coast we escape the attentions of the night fighters and either they can't depress their guns low enough or they are not expecting us to be at this height the flak doesn't manage inflict any meaningful damage.

I don't think that I have ever been more grateful to see the Suffolk coastline in my life before the thin shingle bank of Orfordness slips below and I decide to make a bit more height now that we are back over dear Old Blighty. Clive fires off a flare to let the ground staff know that we need the Blood Wagon and a quick landing but also that we still have bombs on board. Although not the finest landing I have ever managed in my life it will do.

Poor Peter our Tail Gunner copped it in the head so at least he wouldn't have known much about it. Fraser, our MUG copped a nasty looking one in the neck causing lacerations but the quack says that he should be fit enough to fly within a day or two once the stitches have healed. Flt Sgt Tullo has a shrapnel lodged in his skull and although it is touch and go the quack says they are hopeful of saving his life but he will never fly again. I feel guilty that I am actually relieved that he will no longer be a member of my crew, but regret that my last words to him were quite so acrimonious.